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ABSTRACT

This paper presents research-based viewpoints on black students' self-esteem and how it relates to achievement. Both historical events and research findings support the argument that blacks' self-esteem and achievement levels have been systematically kept at a lower level than whites'. Arguments for both segregation and insulation are considered important factors in determining the cause of black students' low self-esteem. Cultural differences in black parents' child rearing practices are viewed as major obstacles for black children, particularly black males, to overcome due to the differential teaching strategies of instrumental competencies. Conflict may result from these differences and black cultural training may be viewed as deviant and therefore be condemned. Thus, due to the negative perceptions of others, these cultural differences can create barriers between white teachers and black students and cause low self-esteem in blacks. To increase black students' success in school and their self-esteem, more interventions that focus on family and school experience and on reducing instructional and structural barriers will be necessary. (JS)

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BLACK STUDENTS: SELF ESTEEM AND ACHIEVEMENT

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Matt Christmon

Although education as a means by which to obtain equality of opportunity has been the hope of Black Americans, the historical policy toward Blacks in general, and Black males in particular, has been described by Jones (1979) as one of "Compulsory and voluntary ignorance." Until the end of the Civil War, the prevailing policy in the South was one of exclusion for Blacks. Most states employed statutory provisions prohibiting individuals from teaching Black people.

The 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision was to many Blacks a symbol of renewed hope that an equal educational opportunity would become a reality and that subsequent life changes would be enhanced for them. The struggle for a liberating education commenced during the early days, but remains elusive even today. Statistical research supports the conclusion that elementary and secondary education generally has not worked to the advantage of Blacks, and has been even less advantageous for the collective Black male. The cumulative gap between Blacks and whites in educational achievement levels begins with kindergarten and increases through the post-secondary years. Selected research conclusions are indicative of the educational system's failure of Black students (Patton, 1981).

The testimony of social scientists and educators in the "Brown vs. Board of Education" trial, as well as a series of decisions at the state level, helped to establish the official government policy that segregation in public schools is harmful to self-esteem of minority school children(Stephan, 1978).

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Throughout American history, Blacks, in many cases, have been dominated by whites, particulary in the South during the late 1800's. It is typical to read statements similar to one written by Goetz: "Dudley County was established by aristocratic planters with large numbers of slaves and organized into cash-crop plantations. Blacks have always made up a large proportion of the county's population, by white planters have dominated the economic and political life (Goetz and Breneman, 1988). This attitude perpetuates itself with the majority members of this society.

Current Issues

The "Insulation Hypothesis" maintains that instead of bolstering the self-esteen of Black students, increased contact with majority members may actually lower Black self-esteem. Proponents of the insulation hypothesis argue that as Black school children experience increased contact with white students, they will internalize the negative images of Blacks held by whites and eventually will come to view themselves in the same disparaging terms. The basis for the proposition that minority self-esteem is negatively influenced by contact with whites may be traced to the work of early social theorists such as Cooley (1902), who argued that self-concepts are formed as reflections of the reponses and evaluation of others in the environment.

In an attempt to explain why Black students in predominantly white schools have lower self-esteem than Blacks in segregated institutions, Rosenbery (1977) identified three factors that mediate the impact of recial contact on feelings of self-worth. He referred to these factors as (1) the dissonant communications environment, (2) the dissonant cultural environment, and (3) the

dissonant comparison reference group.

Rosenberg (1977) maintains that compared to Blacks in segregated settings, a minority child in a majority setting will be more likely to be exposed to negative communications about him or herself as a group member (i.e., his or her group status in the majority world). Blacks in integrated settings will, therefore, experience lower levels of self-esteem because of this "dissonant communications environment."

Minority students in integrated settings also may suffer a loss of self-esteem when realized that their norms and values are different from those of the white majority, and that whites consider Black culture to be inferior. Rosenberg (1977) mentions racial differences in family structure as one example of this "dissonant cultural environment." He argues that Blacks from single-parent families will be stigmatized by whites from intact (two-parent) families and will suffer a loss of self-esteem as a result.

According to Rosenberg (1977), Blacks in integrated settings may also be confronted by a "dissonant comparision reference group." Here he argues that people tend to compare their social characteristics with the characteristics of those people in immediate social settings. This poses no problem for Blacks in segregated schools because they are comparing themselves with other Black students. Blacks in predominately white schools, however, will compare themselves with whites, and they will experience a decline in self-esteem because of their relatively unfavorable position (Kraus, 1985). Inspite of the well-meaning intentions of many educators, schools harbor an institutional racism that many believe result from the complex interplay of ethnicity, social-

economic status, and community history and development (e.g., Grant & Sleeter, 1986, Johnson, 1985).

Finally, academic performance represents one of the most important areas in which students make status comparisions. As Rosenberg (1977) observes, the academic performance of Blacks generally is below that of whites. This does not present a problem for Blacks in segregated schools, because it is impossible for wide racial discrepancies in academic performances with that of their white classmates, their relatively low academic standing will result in loss of self-esteem.

Current Research and Effective Programs

From the late 1960's some minority researchers have proposed an alternative model which may be designed as a difference model. They argue that minority groups have their own cultures; that their cultures embody different child-rearing practices which inculcate different instrumental competencies; and that minority children probably fail in school because schools do not recognize and utilize their unique competencies for teaching, learning and testing (Ramirez and Castenada, 1974).

In no human population, under normal circumstances, are child-rearing practices an irrational or random set of activities; rather, they form a part of a culturally-organized system which evolved to meet people's needs within their effective environment (Levin, 1974).

Mainstream developmentalists did not seriously study Black children until the 1960's. Moreover, when they began to study Black children, they did not study them in their own right, but because Black children were perceived as a social problem and

because mainstream developmentalists were searching for universal truths about child development. Mainstream developmentalists and educational psyshologists have long believed that the disportionate school failure of Black children is due to a lack of cognitive and other competencies required to do well in school. One group (the hereditary proponents) has held that this lack of abilities is due to genetic deficiences; whereas, the environmentalists held that it is due to environmental deficiencies (Ogbu, 1978).

Ogbu (1985) also mentions the environmentalists believe that white middle-class children do well in school because they possess the right kind of competencies--cognitive, linguistic, motivational, and social--as a result of white middle-class parents' child-rearing practices. Black children, on the other hand, are thought to do poorly in school because they lack such competencies because Black parents do not use the same child-rearing practices as white middle-class parents. The way out of this Black developmental and educational dilemma, the environmentalists say, is to enable Black preschool children to acquire white middle-class children's early childhood experiences, and the instrumental competencies they generate through specially designed programs.

For the following reasons, Ogbu (1985) states that portraying white middle-class patterns a standard by which others are judged must be rejected:

(1) Populations differ in cognitive, linguistic competencies within the same society. This could be because of cultural imperatives requiring different instrumental competencies. The social and economic realities of the population dictate the cultural task. Such competencies usually become the qualities which parents and other child-rearing agents perceive as desirable

to foster in children.

(2) There is no universally correct method of childrearing for developing instrumental competencies (Baumirind, 1967). Also, child-rearing techniques depend on the nature of the instrumental competencies which adults seek to inculcate in the youth and which children seek to acquire as they grow older (Ogbu, 1981).

(3) A general theory of relationship between childrearing and development of instrumental competencies should not be based on data derived from studying on population. Rather, such a theory should emerge from knowledge of childrearing and development in different populations. For example, Black childrearing and development should be studies qua Black childrearing and development. Chicano childrearing and development should be studied qua Chicano childrearing and development, and the same for white middle-class childrearing and development.

Culture of Group (Values, Philosophy, Etc.)

Child-rearing practices form a part of a culturally organized system which evolved to meet people's needs within their effective environment (Levine, 1974). How one makes it is defined differently in different populations, but is always a shared cultural knowledge. The theory of "making it" usually includes knowledge of a range of cultural tasks and status positions available: What is perceived obtainable is what the child may strive to achieve. Therefore, different populations may have evolved different strategies appropriate to their environment which determines the instrumental competencies, such as practical skills, cognitive skills, communicative skills, social skills, etc.

Black Americans, particularly inner-city Blacks and white middle-class Americans, have not traditionally occupied and do not now occupy the same effective environment. An effective environment is made up of the technoeconomic resources of the population, as well as its members' knowledge of their past and present opportunity structure. Even in the same city, they live in a kind of symbolic relationship where dominant whites (who have power) exploit the more richly endowed parts of the environment, leaving the portions of marginal resources to Blacks (Ogbu, 1981). Many Black children observe their parents experiencing scarcity of jobs, unstable jobs--unlike the white middle-class environment. Of equal importance to conventional resources such as other residents and caretaker institutions is the subeconomy, or street economy (Bullock, 1973). Although Blacks may achieve some measure of success, the inner-city is still an environment of marginal conventional resources; for many, the street economy is more lucrative.

Cultural Impact/Conflict With School

Oftentimes, perception of inner-city Blacks' ideas of "making it" comes from their parents. The parents tell them what kind of people they want their children to be. Many times, the older children strive to follow the folk theories when they grow up. Folk theories are based on knowledge inherited from previous generations, on images of present and future opportunities. These theories of success differ from those of the white middle-class. The difference lies largely in the strategies for achieving these goals (Foster, 1974). For example, although inner-city Blacks and middle-class whites desire formal education for jobs, wages, and social prestige, Blacks do not believe as strongly as whites that school credentials are sufficient to achieve these goals. Black

America has had a long history of unequal rewards for equal school efforts and credentials. They tend to be bitter and frustrated that a job ceiling and other racial barriers prevent them from using this conventional method to achieve success as defined by American society. And they have responded to these barriers by (a) developing alternate strategies of "making it" (b) developing alternate theories of "making it;" and developing an admiration for those who "make it" outside of conventional strategies of schooling and wage labor. The Black ideal is to stress the importance of other strategies along with the white middle-class. Blacks teach their children to acquire formal education for conventional jobs, but also teach them instrumental competencies of their own environment.

The school is to reflect the values, norms, and attitudes of the larger society. If this is true, then we may conclude the treatment of Blacks--particularly males--will be an integral part of the approach to the instructional program within the classroom. In a study by Hare (1979), it was found that Black males scored lowest of Black females and their white counterparts. It was also found that white teachers engaged in patterns of expectations that resulted in Black students being given less attention, ignored more, critized more, and praised less than whites were. In an article by Goetz (1988), she records the feeling of the community in relation to teacher attitude. "Black students had been regarded by staff as having low ability. When the district was desegregated, they (Blacks) were placed in separate classrooms and labeled educable mentally retarded, learning disabled, or behavior disordered. A

Black father said: "They've got a percentage set...for how many Blacks are allowed to make the grade."

Implications

If childrearing is the key to improve self-esteem, then there are a few factors which must be taken into consideration:

(1) The use of physical punishment discourages emotional dependency, while encouraging early independence and self-reliance bordering on defiance (Silverstein and Krate, 1975).

(2) Positive training in early independence and self-reliance makes Black children independent much earlier than white middle-class children, thus shortening the duration of effective parental control of Black children (Ladner, 1978).

(3) Being agressive at an early age and parental insistence for the child to fight back when attached by peers encourages children's acceptance of physical action as a means of problem solving (Silverstein and Krate, 1975).

(4) Early withdrawal of emotional support, coupled with repeated punitiveness, probably leads the child to mistrust for parents, which is later generalized as adults and with authority figures (Lader, 1978; Silverstein and Krate, 1975).

In the sister school of Dudley County, there are 14 classroom teachers, a full-time librarian, P.E. teacher, two remedial teachers and a principal. The librarian and one of the fourth grade teachers were Black and female. The custodians and lunchroom workers also were white.

Some recent research (Banks, 1978) offers a concept of the

manner in which social influence processes might affect the relationship between value-interest orientation of Blacks and their orientation toward academic tasks and achievement. Banks convincingly suggests that for Black individuals, the social influence of others similar (Black teachers, counselors, etc.) may serve to convey the appropriate value orientations to achievement tasks. He also states that positive affective expression from Black teachers, Black counselors, etc. would likely result in high interest orientations, set by strong intrinsic efforts. The lack of Black teachers in our schools versus many white educators may in the long run have a negative effect on Black people, in terms of children growing up to be adults.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Ogbu, in press) that there are different kinds of cultural differences with different implications for minority schooling. Some of the rules of behavior for achievement of instructional competencies of many Blacks are called "secondary cultural differences." Blacks tend to see a difference in competencies and behavior and that of the white culture. Blacks, especially males consider it inappropriate to behave like white people in school and their communities. They should know how to deal with white people--how to manipulate whites in such a way as to retain one's safety and identity.

Increasing the proportion of Black school success will, therefore, require more than interventions which focus on family and school experience and on reducing instructional and structural barriers. It will require programs designed to deal with the problem of secondary cultural discontinuities. Children will

need help in separating behaviors and skills which aid in school success and later socioeconomic success from that which imply assimilation into white middle-class culture, and a threat to their identity.

Summary

In my collected readings, I have come to the conclusion that there are two very important factors in Black self-esteem and how it relates to achievement.

(1) Preschool child-rearing practices may have a very large impact on how well Black children achieve in school. Parents should place equal importance on teaching competencies essential for attaining and performing cultural tasks, as well as competencies essential for succeeding in school. The tools needed for school success and achievement are skills in cognitive, linquistic, motivational and social competencies.

The conclusions reached are the assumption that Black children are failing in school because parents do not transmit or are not capable of transmitting them to white middle-class competencies.

(2) There is a feeling in the Black community that says white teachers do not understand the tools needed for teaching Black children, particularly in the inner-city. Few black professionals in our schools and the overwhelming presence of white teachers may very well have serious long-range negative implications on the life progression of Black people. White teachers, perhaps having the best of intentions, may be ineffective in transmitting values to achievement that are instilled by Blacks. Many white teachers may demonstrate the inability to serve as effective standards of social comparison. The innate ability for a Black child to recognize some sort of cultural difference may create barriers very difficult

for him/her to hurdle. In studies where Black students were ignored more, praised less, and criticized more by their teachers, there were apparent feelings of low self-esteem, which resulted in lower academic achievement.

The inability of the public schools to make an impact on the Black male has resulted in a massive disconnection with the national view of Black people. It has become very important for elementary and secondary education to develop quality programs that will liberate the Black American nation. Finally, it is of the utmost importance for American education to recognize and define Black strengths and weakness and respond to the realities in ways this nation has the capabilities of resolving.

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